

MATTER OVER MIND

Joshua Ferris and his “difficult” sophomore novel

BY KATE MCAULEY

Joshua Ferris is watching us. It’s not just a casual glance around a crowded room or a double take at a pretty girl. From behind his horn-rimmed glasses, the 35-year-old New York-based author sifts through our every day lives. Distilling our behaviour and idiosyncrasies. Mining the ebb and flow of modern culture. And then he drip-feeds his observations back to us.

Take his first novel, the 2006 standout hit *Then We Came To The End*. It’s a book of vignettes set in a Chicago advertising agency, inspired by Ferris’ own experience working as a copywriter during the dotcom boom. Uniquely told by a sort of contemporary Greek chorus, the story builds as work-life seeps through the crevices of office politics, open-plan partitioning and ergonomic chairs. Its insights are humorous, tragic, and identifiable – just as fans of *The Office* can spot their very own David Brent or Michael Scott, Ferris’ characters are all painfully real.

Critics and readers loved it and the literary world had a new pin-up – an articulate, thoughtful and handsome one at that. Ferris’ face showed up in newspapers and magazines the world over. His voice rippled across radio airwaves and highbrow podcasts. Fan clubs were initiated in his honour. Women started tweeting about sending him their unmentionables. He’s been called a rock star.

It’s a cliché, but where does one go from there? For Ferris, it was onto *The Unnamed* – the birth of which proved a struggle, not only because of the weight of expectation bearing down on

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him, but because of the more traditional path he chose to take. “Writing this novel was far more constricting,” he tells me on a rainy evening in London. “I was inventing the form with the first book, so I could get away with whatever I wanted.”

While the form may be long established, Ferris’ premise for *The Unnamed* is entirely original. It tells the story of Tim Farnsworth, a partner in a New York law

firm who is beset with an unnamed affliction – his body takes him on long uncontrollable walks. “He’s confronted by a disease that can’t be diagnosed, or cured, which prevents him from living a conventional life,” says Ferris. “The book is about what happens when the presumptions about human will encounter the much more difficult truths of being an organic body in the world. The two things are often at odds with one another. For Tim, he’s confronted with the ineluctable destiny that is foisted upon him by his body.”



Ferris sites the “pernicious attitude of Americans” as his main impetus for developing the ideas behind *The Unnamed*. “We have this idea in the States that we can overcome anything through the sheer force of will alone, but of course we can’t.”

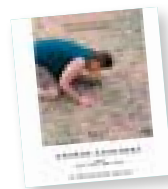
For much of the book, Tim has this attitude towards his ailment. He believes he will find a doctor with an answer, despite many letdowns. In his search for a cure he allows his family to restrain him to his bed and he participates in a bizarre scientific experiment. The fact that his illness is unrecognised adds weight his isolation – there is no AA-esque support group or clique of cancer sufferers. He is, despite his close family, completely alone. It is both compelling and thought provoking.

After concerning himself with such hefty material, Ferris is giving himself a break from writing for now, but he hasn’t stopped paying attention. During our conversation he reveals that the technological revolution concerns him and he’s worried that we’re only experts in our own status updates and email inboxes. “This kind of trivialising of the human experience and of our culture is deeply disturbing to a novelist who depends upon attention being paid elsewhere, outwardly,” he says.

These issues may or may not become the foundation for his next tome, but it’s certainly reassuring to know that he remains on the lookout. ☺

And Then We Came To The End and *The Unnamed* are both out now

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
GREATS
(ACCORDING TO
JOSHUA FERRIS)



IN PERSUASION
NATION

George Saunders

Ferris chose Saunders’ excellent short story “Adams” from this edition to read and discuss on a recent podcast for the *New Yorker*.



THE KNOWN
WORLD

Edward P Jones

The U.S.’ leading African-American author won the Pulitzer Prize for this brave piece of historical fiction.



VERONICA

Mary Gateskill

This is an author with a knack for capturing the zeitgeist. Read this to relive the gritty and glamorous ‘80s and ‘90s.